

WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH?
An Overview

A **paragraph** is a basic unit of organization in writing in which a group of related sentences develops one main idea. A paragraph can be as short as one sentence or as long as ten sentences. The number of sentences is unimportant; however, the paragraph should be long enough to develop the main idea clearly.

The following model contains all of the elements of a good paragraph. Read it carefully two or three times and try to analyze its structure.

Model 1: Paragraph structure

Gold

- 1 Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important characteristics. First of all, gold has a lustrous beauty that is resistant to corrosion*. Therefore, it is suitable for jewelry, coins, and ornamental purposes. Gold never needs to be polished and will remain beautiful forever. For example, a Macedonian* coin remains as untarnished* today as
- 5 the day it was minted twenty-three centuries ago. Another important characteristic of gold is its usefulness to industry and science. For many years, it has been used in hundreds of industrial applications. The most recent use of gold is in astronauts' suits. Astronauts wear gold-plated heat shields for protection outside the spaceship. In conclusion, gold is treasured not only for its beauty, but also for its utility.

THE THREE PARTS OF A PARAGRAPH

A paragraph has three major structural parts: a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence.

The **topic sentence** states the main idea of the paragraph. It not only names the topic of the paragraph, but it also limits the topic to one or two areas that can be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph. The specific area is called the controlling idea. Notice how the topic sentence of the model states both the topic and the controlling idea:

Topic
Sentence

(Topic)

(Controlling Idea)

Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important characteristics.

corrosion: chemical damage Macedonian: from an ancient Mediterranean culture
untarnished: unchanged in color

Supporting sentences develop the topic sentence. That is, they explain the topic sentence by giving reasons, examples, facts, statistics, and quotations. Some of the supporting sentences that explain the topic sentence about gold are:

Supporting Sentences

First of all, gold has a lustrous beauty that is resistant to corrosion. For example, a Macedonian coin remains as untarnished today as the day it was minted twenty-three centuries ago. Another important characteristic of gold is its utility in industry and science. The most recent application of gold is in astronauts' suits.

The **concluding sentence** signals the end of the paragraph and leaves the reader with important points to remember:

Concluding Sentence

In conclusion, gold is treasured not only for its beauty, but also for its utility.

TWO ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS

In addition to the three structural parts of a paragraph, a good paragraph also has the elements of unity and coherence.

Unity

Unity means that you discuss only *one* main idea in a paragraph. The main idea is stated in the topic sentence, and then each and every supporting sentence develops that idea. If, for example, you announce in your topic sentence that you are going to discuss two important characteristics of gold, discuss only those. Do not discuss anything else such as the price of gold, the history of gold, or gold mining.

Coherence

Coherence means that your paragraph is easy to read and understand because (1) your supporting sentences are in some kind of logical order, and (2) your ideas are connected by the use of appropriate transition signals. For example, in the paragraph about gold, there are two main supporting ideas: gold is beautiful, and gold is useful. Each of these supporting ideas is discussed, one after the other, and an example is given for each one. This is one kind of logical order. Furthermore, the relationship between the ideas is clearly shown by using appropriate transition words and phrases such as "first of all," "the second important characteristic," "for example," and "in conclusion."

In summary, a well-written paragraph contains five elements: a topic sentence, supporting sentences, a concluding sentence, unity, and coherence. In the first section of this book, you will study and practice each of these elements.

THE ASSIGNMENT FORMAT

Below are instructions and a model of one possible format for the assignments you will prepare for this class. Your instructor may ask you to use this format, or s/he may have other requirements.

1. Use only 8½" × 11" lined, 3-hole notebook paper.
2. Write a title in the center of the top line.
3. Write the practice number, page number and practice name in the upper left-hand corner.

4. Write your name, the course number and date in the upper right-hand corner.
5. Leave one-inch margins on both sides of the page.
6. Indent the first line of every paragraph.*
7. Write on every other line.
8. Number your pages.
9. Write in ink.

Model 2: Assignment format

Practice number Page number Practice name	Practice 2, page 3 Unity	Student name English 001 3/24/--	Your name, the course number and date
Gold			Title centered
Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important characteristics. First of all, gold has a lustrous beauty which is resistant to corrosion. Therefore, it is suitable for jewelry, coins and ornamental purposes. Gold never needs to be polished and will remain beautiful forever. For example, a Macedonian coin remains as untarnished today			one-inch margin

Notice that the first line in the paragraph is indented—moved to the right. While the practice of indenting is changing, particularly in business letter writing, it is still the accepted practice in academic writing.

HOW TO WRITE A TITLE

Single paragraphs do not usually have titles. Giving your practice paragraphs titles, however, may help you to organize and limit your thoughts. For longer essays or reports, though, the use of titles (as you will see in this book) will become more necessary.

A title tells the reader what the topic of the paragraph is. It is usually a word or phrase, not a sentence. It should be brief, but not so brief that it doesn't tell the reader what to expect.

*INDENT the first line of every paragraph. When typing, indent the first line 5 spaces. When writing by hand, indent the first line about one inch from the margin.

1. The first, last, and all important words in a title are capitalized. Prepositions and articles are not important words. Prepositions of more than five letters, however, may be capitalized. Articles that begin the title, of course, are capitalized.
2. The title is not underlined.
3. The title is not enclosed in quotation marks, nor is it ended with a period.

Example

My Greatest Culture Shock
How to Choose a Good Used Car
Inflation Affects Everybody
Backpacking in the Mountains
Writing Academic English
Riding the Subway in New York

The Topic Sentence

Every good paragraph has a topic sentence, which clearly states the topic and the controlling idea of the paragraph. It is a complete sentence. It is usually (but not always) the first sentence in the paragraph.

A topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph. It briefly indicates what the paragraph is going to discuss. For this reason, the topic sentence is a helpful guide to both the writer and the reader. The writer can see what information to include (and what information to exclude). The reader can see what the paragraph is going to be about and is therefore better prepared to understand it.

There are three important points to remember about the topic sentence:

A topic sentence is a *complete sentence*; that is, it contains a subject, a verb, and (usually) a complement.

The following are *not* complete sentences.

Driving on freeways.
The importance of gold.
How to register for college classes.

A topic sentence contains both a *topic* and a *controlling idea*. It names the topic and then limits the topic to a specific area to be discussed in the space of a single paragraph.

The following examples show how a topic sentence states both the topic and the controlling idea in a complete sentence.

Driving on freeways requires skill and alertness.
Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important characteristics.
Registering for college classes can be a frustrating experience for new students.

A topic sentence gives only the main idea; therefore, it is the most general statement in the paragraph. It does not give any specific details.

This is an example of a general statement that could serve as a topic sentence:

Good *The Arabic origin of many English words is not always obvious.*

This sentence, on the other hand, is too specific to serve as a topic sentence:

Too Specific *The slang expression "so long" (meaning goodbye) is probably a corruption of the Arabic "salaam."*

POSITION OF TOPIC SENTENCES

The topic sentence may be the first or last sentence in a paragraph. The topic sentence may also be the first *and* last sentence of the paragraph—"sandwich-style." A "sandwich-style" paragraph is especially helpful to your reader if the paragraph is very long. The second topic sentence in the "sandwich-style" paragraph also serves as a concluding sentence.

Study the following three paragraphs. Notice the different positions for the topic sentence in each. The topic sentences are underlined.

Model 2: Position of topic sentences**Hurricanes****Topic Sentence**

Hurricanes, which are also called cyclones, exert tremendous power. These violent storms are often a hundred miles in diameter, and their winds can reach velocities* of seventy-five miles per hour or more. Furthermore, the strong winds and heavy rainfall that accompany them can completely destroy a small town in a couple of hours. The energy that is released by a hurricane in one day exceeds the total energy consumed by humankind throughout the world in one year.

Famous School "Failures"**Topic Sentence**

Albert Einstein, one of the world's geniuses, failed his university entrance examinations on his first attempt. William Faulkner, one of America's noted writers, never finished college because he could not pass his English courses. Sir Winston Churchill, who is considered one of the masters of the English language, had to have special tutoring in English during elementary school. These few examples show that failure in school does not always predict failure in life.

Synonyms**Topic Sentence**

Synonyms, words that have the same basic meaning, do not always have the same emotional meaning. For example, the words "stingy" and "frugal" both mean "careful with money." However, to call a person stingy is an insult, while the word frugal has a much more positive connotation*. Similarly, a person wants to be slender but not skinny, and aggressive, but not pushy. Therefore, you should be careful in choosing words because many so-called synonyms are not really synonymous at all.

Topic Sentence (Conclusion)

velocities: speeds connotation: implied meaning

Practice 1: Recognizing Topic Sentences

Remember, the topic sentence indicates the main idea of a paragraph and is the most general statement in the paragraph.

STEP 1 Decide which of the following sentences is the topic sentence of the paragraph.

STEP 2 Write TS on the line next to that sentence.

STEP 3 Decide what order the supporting sentences should be in and number them 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Paragraph 1

- _____ a. Next, add antifreeze to your windshield washer fluid; otherwise, the fluid will freeze and possibly break the container.
- _____ b. First, put on snow tires if you plan to drive on snowy, icy roads very often.
- _____ c. Driving in winter, especially on snowy, icy roads, can be less troublesome if you take a few simple precautions*.
- _____ d. Finally, it is also a good idea to carry tire chains, a can of spray to unfreeze door locks and a windshield scraper in your car when driving in winter weather.
- _____ e. Second, check the amount of antifreeze in your radiator and add more if necessary.

Paragraph 2

- _____ a. Furthermore, researchers are continuing to work on the development of an efficient, electrically powered automobile.
- _____ b. Researchers in the automobile industry are experimenting with different types of engines and fuels as alternatives to the conventional gasoline engines.
- _____ c. One new type of engine, which burns diesel oil instead of gasoline, has been available for several years.
- _____ d. Finally, several automobile manufacturers are experimenting with methanol, which is a mixture of gasoline and methyl alcohol, as an automobile fuel.
- _____ e. A second type is the gas turbine engine, which can use fuels made from gasoline, diesel oil, kerosene, other petroleum distillates*, or methanol.

precaution: advance action to prevent something

distillate: a substance obtained from another substance

Paragraph 3

- _____ a. Later on, people began to write on pieces of leather, which were rolled into scrolls.
- _____ b. In the earliest times, people carved or painted messages on rocks.
- _____ c. In the Middle Ages, heavy paper called parchment was used for writing; books were laboriously copied by hand.
- _____ d. With the invention of the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century, the modern printing industry was born.
- _____ e. Some form of written communication has been used throughout the centuries.

Paragraph 4

- _____ a. If there had been a big storm on the day of a baby's birth, the baby might have been named Thunder Cloud.
- _____ b. American Indian names are very descriptive, for Indians were usually named for a physical attribute, for an occurrence in nature, or for an animal.
- _____ c. Grey Eagle, Red Dog, Big Bear, and Spotted Wolf are examples of Indians named after animals.
- _____ d. Indians with distinctive physical characteristics might be given such names as Big Foot or Crooked Leg.

Paragraph 5

- _____ a. For one thing, individual I.Q.* scores vary considerably.
- _____ b. Many experts also question whether I.Q. scores are related to intelligence.
- _____ c. Furthermore, most psychologists agree that intelligence tests are biased* in favor of middle-class children.
- _____ d. The validity* of standardized intelligence tests is being seriously questioned by educators and psychologists.
- _____ e. In fact, motivation* seems to be just as important as intelligence in determining a person's ability to learn.

I.Q.: Intelligence Quotient
motivation: desire

biased: prejudiced

validity: truth

THE TWO PARTS OF A TOPIC SENTENCE

A topic sentence has two essential parts: the topic and the controlling idea. The *topic* names the subject or main idea of the paragraph. The *controlling idea* makes a specific comment about the topic, which indicates what the rest of the paragraph will say about the topic. It limits or controls the topic to a specific aspect of the topic to be discussed in the space of a single paragraph.

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
Convenience foods are easy to prepare.

In this example, the topic is named: convenience foods. A specific comment is then made about the topic: they are easy to prepare. From this sentence, the reader immediately knows that the supporting sentences in the remainder of the paragraph will explain or prove how quick and easy it is to prepare convenience foods, and perhaps give some examples (frozen dinners, canned soups, etc.).

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
American cooking reflects the native foods of America's immigrant population.

In this example, the topic is American food. The controlling idea of this topic sentence is that Americans eat a lot of food that originally came from other countries. Therefore, the reader should expect the paragraph to give examples of popular "foreign" foods such as fried rice (Chinese), tacos (Mexican), sauerbraten (German), sukiyaki (Japanese), spaghetti (Italian), and so on.

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
The average American teenager consumes enormous quantities of junk food.

In this example, the topic is the average American teenager. The controlling idea about the topic states that the American teenager eats a lot of junk food. Thus, the rest of the paragraph should discuss the quantities and types of junk food that American teenagers eat (soft drinks, potato chips, candy bars, etc.).

Practice 2: Identifying the Parts of a Topic Sentence

Circle the topic and underline the controlling idea in each of the following sentences.

Example

Driving on freeways requires skill and alertness.

1. Driving in Tokyo requires nerves of steel*.
2. Driving in Tokyo requires an aggressive attitude.
3. Living in a dormitory helps foreign students improve their English faster.
4. Living in a dormitory helps foreign students learn about American culture more quickly.
5. Living in a dormitory may cause severe culture shock for some foreign students.

nerves of steel: very strong
 nerves (idiom)

6. San Francisco is famous for its temperate climate.
7. San Francisco is well known for its many tourist attractions.
8. San Francisco has a great variety of ethnic* neighborhoods.
9. Meeting and making friends with Americans is a major problem for many foreign students.
10. Communicating in English is a major problem for foreign students.
11. In my opinion, many television commercials are misleading.
12. In the opinion of the nation's economic experts, the primary cause of inflation is our dependence on imported oil.
13. A good topic sentence has two essential parts.
14. Owning a large automobile is quickly becoming an expensive luxury.

WRITING TOPIC SENTENCES: TWO REMINDERS

One: A topic sentence should be neither too general nor too specific. If it is too general, the reader cannot tell exactly what the paragraph is going to discuss. If it is too specific, the writer may not have anything left to write about in the rest of the paragraph.

Think of a topic sentence like the name of a particular course on a restaurant menu. When you order food in a restaurant, you want to know more about a particular course than just "meat" or "soup" or "salad." You want to know *generally* what kind of salad it is. Potato salad? Mixed green salad? Fruit salad? You do not necessarily want to know all of its ingredients.

Similarly, the reader of a paragraph wants to know *generally* what to expect in a paragraph; the reader does not want to learn all of the specific details in the first sentence.

Too general American food is terrible.

Too specific American food is tasteless and greasy because Americans use too many canned, frozen, and prepackaged foods and because everything is fried in oil or butter.

Good American food is tasteless and greasy.

Two: Do not include too many unrelated ideas in your topic sentence; if you do, your paragraph will not be unified.

Too many ideas San Francisco is famous for its temperate climate, its many tourist attractions, and its cosmopolitan* atmosphere.

The three parts of this controlling idea are too unrelated for a single paragraph. They would require three separate paragraphs.

Good San Francisco is famous for its many tourist attractions.

ethnic: of different racial and cultural backgrounds cosmopolitan: international

Practice 3: Writing Topic Sentences

- A. Write a topic sentence for each of the following topics. Remember to include both a topic (main idea) and a controlling idea.

Example

Topic: The effect(s) of television on children.

Topic Sentence: Television is harmful to children because it teaches them violence as a way of life.

or

Television retards a child's reading ability.

1. The effect(s) of smoking on a person's health.
 2. The benefits of foreign travel.
 3. The importance of a college education for your field of study (engineering, medical technology, art, business, etc.).
 4. The cause(s) of a current problem in your country (or in the United States).
 5. A cultural difference between your country and the United States.
- B. Choose, either individually or with your classmates as a group, five additional topics that interest you. Write these topics in the spaces below. Then write topic sentences for each.
6. _____
 7. _____
 8. _____
 9. _____
 10. _____

The Concluding Sentence

Now that you know how to write a good topic sentence for a paragraph, you should also learn how to write a good concluding sentence. A concluding sentence is not absolutely necessary, but it is very often helpful to the reader because it signals the end of the paragraph and because it reminds him/her of your important points.

A concluding sentence serves three purposes:

1. It signals the end of the paragraph. (Use an end-of-paragraph signal such as "In conclusion," "In summary," "Finally," etc.)
2. It summarizes the main points of the paragraph.
3. It gives a final comment on your topic and leaves the reader with the most important ideas to think about.

The examples below demonstrate two different types of concluding sentences. The first one paraphrases the topic sentence; i.e., * the concluding sentence repeats the main idea of the topic sentence in different words. The second example summarizes the two main points of the paragraph, which were not specifically stated in the topic sentence.

Model 3: Concluding sentences

Synonyms

Synonyms, words that have the same basic meaning, do not always have the same emotional meaning. For example, the words "stingy" and "frugal" both mean "careful with money." However, to call a person stingy is an insult, while the word frugal has a much more positive connotation. Similarly, a person wants to be slender but not skinny, and aggressive but not pushy. Therefore, you should be careful in choosing words because many so-called synonyms are not really synonymous at all.

Gold

Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important characteristics. First of all, gold has a lustrous beauty that is resistant to corrosion. Therefore, it is suitable for jewelry, coins, and ornamental purposes. Gold never needs to be polished and will remain beautiful forever. For example, a Macedonian coin remains as untarnished today as the day it was minted twenty-three centuries ago. Another important characteristic of gold is its usefulness to industry and science. For many years, it has been used in hundreds of industrial applications. The most recent use of gold is in astronauts' suits. Astronauts wear gold-plated heat shields for protection outside the spaceship. In conclusion, gold is treasured not only for its beauty, but also for its utility.

Practice 4: Writing Concluding Sentences

- STEP 1 Underline the topic sentence in each paragraph.
 STEP 2 Determine the main idea of each paragraph.
 STEP 3 Add a good concluding sentence to each. You may either paraphrase the topic sentence or summarize the main points.
 STEP 4 Begin each concluding sentence with an end-of-paragraph signal.

Paragraph 1

- 1 You can reduce gas consumption in your car by careful driving and good maintenance. Don't speed. Gas consumption is about 10 percent higher at 60 miles per hour than at 50 miles per hour and even greater at higher speeds. Avoid fast stops and starts because they wear your tires out in addition to using a lot of gas. Check your tire pressure often because underinflated tires reduce gas mileage considerably. Get your car tuned up regularly because an inefficiently operating engine results in inefficient fuel consumption.